



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Structure, agency and transatlantic relations in the Trump era

Citation for published version:

Peterson, J 2018, 'Structure, agency and transatlantic relations in the Trump era', *Journal of European Integration*, vol. 40, no. 5, pp. 637-652. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2018.1489801>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/07036337.2018.1489801](https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2018.1489801)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Journal of European Integration

Publisher Rights Statement:

"This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of European Integration on 8 Oct 2018, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2018.1489801>."

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Structure, Agency and Transatlantic Relations in the Trump Era

John Peterson¹
University of Edinburgh
Politics & International Relations
School of Social and Political Science
Chrystal Macmillan Building
15a George Square
Edinburgh EH8 9LD
Scotland/UK
john.peterson@ed.ac.uk

Abstract

No question encountered in the social sciences can be answered without appeal to some notion of the relative importance of structure versus agency. International relations (IR) appears to be entering an era of shifting global power as the world waits to see how Donald Trump's 'America first' agenda plays out. Will the structure of the international system constrain Trump as a change agent? Or will the Trump administration's agency lead to wrenching changes that threaten both the liberal international order and transatlantic alliance? This paper resorts to debates about structure v. agency in IR to argue that crossroads have been reached at 3 levels: the international system, transatlantic relations, and democratic politics. All are linked to one another in terms of outcomes, but it is perhaps the domestic level – where the negative externalities of globalization must be confronted – where changes are needed most urgently.

¹ I am grateful to the editors and 3 anonymous reviewers for useful feedback, as well as to attendees at seminars where earlier drafts were presented at the University of Warwick, the Georgia Institute of Technology and the University of California (Berkeley).

No question encountered in the social sciences can be answered – if the answer involves an argument about causality – without appeal to some idea of the relative importance of structure versus agency. As Hay (1995: 189) suggests, all causal explanations assume, implicitly or explicitly, how relatively autonomous agents (or ‘actors’) are to make choices about how they act, as well as how constrained they are by the wider setting in which they find themselves: ‘Are the effects we wish to explain the products of actors displaying their agency, making unconstrained choices; or are these effects the products of the unfolding logic of a structure (or set of structures) over which agents (individual or collective) have no control’?

Most debates about international relations (IR) boil down to differing views about whether outcomes result more from the agency of states or the structure of the international system. The structure that emerged and cohered after the end of the Second World War was variously termed the ‘liberal’ or ‘western’ international order, depending upon one’s wider theoretical perspective. The durability of that order, as well as of the transatlantic alliance between the United States (US) and Europe, has been called into question as never before by multiple crises besetting the European Union (EU) and the election of Donald Trump as US President. If all of this were not enough, it coincides with tension (at best) and disjuncture (at worst) between rising multipolarity and established multilateralism.

This article offers a theoretically-framed assessment of the prospects for both the transatlantic alliance and post-war international order in the Trump era. Both the US and EU face choices about whether to prioritise new alliances. However, their options may be constrained by sunk costs invested in deep transatlantic policy cooperation on issues including counterterrorism, financial markets regulation, and military strategy within NATO. The question is whether the transatlantic alliance is structural in the sense of being resilient even in the face of wider, global power shifts and the rise to power of change agents such as Trump. This article offers a broad investigation of whether agency trumps structure, or vice versa, in the transatlantic alliance and broader international order of the early 21st century. However, it does not limit itself – as much IR theory does – to locating causation exclusively at the level of the international system of states. Rather, its analysis extends to multiple levels including American and European civil society and voters.

Section 1 below interrogates the role of structure and agency in competing theoretical accounts of IR. Section 2 examines the extent to which multiple, established structures – internationally and domestically – are likely to limit the Trump administration’s choices as it seeks to realise its ‘America first’ agenda. In section 3, we shift to Europe and assess its capacity to defend multilateralism and the liberal international order despite the rise of Trump. Section 4 zeroes in on the transatlantic alliance itself. It seeks to judge how much the established habits and institutions of US-European cooperation can be expected to weather multiple shocks including the election of Trump and ‘Brexit’: the United Kingdom’s (UK) decision to leave the EU. A conclusion summarises the article’s central argument. Put simply, it is that recent evidence suggesting that liberal internationalism no longer pays domestically in democratic politics means the futures of the liberal order, transatlantic alliance and western democratic politics are inextricably bound together. Defenders of all three need to develop new and convincing narratives about their benefits, as well as about the affinities that bind together democracies.

1. Structure and Agency in IR Theory

Structural logic has long dominated IR theory, particularly - for obvious reasons - during the Cold War. From the end of the Second World War until the early 1990s, the balance of power in IR was a (more or less) bipolar one, with most states hitching their wagon – voluntarily or not – to a US or Soviet-led alliance. Despite the emergence, especially amongst former colonies, of a ‘non-aligned’ movement of states, what mattered most were ebbs and flows of power between the superpowers.

In these circumstances, realists of all stripes theorised that states are egoistic and power-maximizing entities. Cold War competition yielded an insecure international system in which anarchy prevailed, with no overarching authority higher than states to ensure order. An edgy stability prevailed only because most states aligned with either the US or Soviet Union. The scope for agency or choice was strictly limited.

At one of the heights of Cold War tension, an impressively parsimonious version of realism was borne. Kenneth Waltz, the father of neo-realism, came to be viewed - and much-criticised - as a structural determinist. His Theory of International Politics (note its simple yet audacious title) argued that ‘[i]n defining international-political structures we take states with whatever traditions, habits, objectives, desires, and forms of government they may have...We

abstract from every attribute of states except their capabilities' (Waltz 1979: 99). In other words, neo-realism theorised exclusively based on the distribution of capabilities between agents – states – in the structure of the international system. Agency mattered and states certainly acted, especially to enhance their capabilities and, therefore, their power. But structure trumped agency in terms of causation. The international system of states 'work[ed] to keep outcomes within narrow ranges' (Waltz 1979: 73). As Rengger (2007: 120-1) neatly summarizes: '[i]t is the structure of the international system that causes states (and, thus the individuals who act for states) to act in the manner that they do'.²

The leading alternative to realism has long been liberal IR theory, as developed by John Ikenberry (2001; 2017), Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye (Keohane and Nye 2011; Nye 2015), amongst others. Even before the Cold War ended, they contended that the liberal post-war international order – with the transatlantic alliance at its core – had institutionalised mostly stable and cooperative relations between states. Before but especially after the Cold War ended, that order was buttressed by international institutions and law that restrained states from engaging in behaviour that violated progressively stronger international norms (Ikenberry 2001). The argument was (and is) that the liberal international order both constrained states and was durable.

Liberal IR theorists thus did not really challenge, let alone reject, the structural determinism of neo-realism. As one leading liberal theorist put it, all IR theories are 'systemic theories in a Waltzian sense' (Moravcsik 2003: 7). That is, all theorise on the basis of the distribution of power between states, thus privileging structure over agency.

Meanwhile, constructivist IR theorists and foreign policy analysts showed how choices made by political leaders can not only determine international outcomes but reshape the structural conditions faced by future policy-makers. Wendt (1992) – a leading constructivist – insisted that anarchy 'is what states make of it'. That is, states have no choice but to interact, negotiate, and seek to understand each other to construct (socially) the international system. Thus, their agency matters in determining norms, rules and habits that govern the structure in which they operate. Simply put, constructivists view structure and agency as mutually constitutive, not least because agents perceive that – and more particularly how – their choices can alter structures.

² Emphasis in original.

Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), for its part, focuses on foreign policy decision-making and what determines choices that policy makers make (see Smith [et al](#) 2012). The structure of the international system certainly matters. But it matters – in theoretical terms – insofar as how it is perceived in the minds of those who make foreign policy. FPA makes few prior assumptions about how actors' perceptions of the structural distribution of power between states constrain their choices. The focus is firmly on those actors and their agency. In contrast with most IR theory, there is no supposition in FPA scholarship that structure trumps agency (see Carlsnaes 1992).

At a time of unprecedented doubt about the resilience of the international system, debates about whether we should look more to agents or structure to describe, explain and predict IR matter more than ever. Such debates are by no means purely theoretical. To simplify only a little, contestation boils down to disputes about the extent to which we will witness more change or continuity on two cardinal questions. One is how much power has shifted between agents in IR. Even before Brexit or Trump's election, a considerable body of work was underway investigating how and how much superior rates of economic growth amongst emerging states constituted a 'global power shift' away from the West (see Alcaro 2016). One such contribution portrayed a 'World in Disarray': '[i]t is difficult not to take seriously the possibility that one historical era is ending and another beginning' (Haas 2017: xii). A 'new world disorder' arises from how '[p]ower is more distributed in more hands than at any time in history' (Haas 2017: 5, 11). This claim obviously is as much or more about how power has shifted away from states than between them. But few claim that the West retains its traditional post-war position of dominance in IR.

A separate dispute concerns whether an international order mostly constructed by the West is both robust and malleable enough to contain power shifts power peacefully. It is tempting to conclude that when emerging powers pursue their interests assertively – as Russia in Crimea or China in the South China Sea – it is on the basis of their calculation that the international order (from which emerging states mostly benefit) is resilient enough to bend without breaking. But even if they are right, two grave dangers arise. One is miscalculations: intentions may be misread, red lines drawn that cannot be rescinded, and powerful states can stumble into conflict unintentionally. A second danger is that America's interlocutors focus overmuch on Trump and his eccentricities without paying sufficient attention to deficiencies in the international order that require repair. By many accounts,

dark and dangerous days have arrived in IR. Assessing whether they will persist or eventually lift starts by considering whether structure outplays agency in causal terms, or vice versa.

2. Agency, Structure and Trump

One of the great observers of the idea of power – Harold Lasswell (1950: 214) – observed that ‘[t]he vocabulary of American public life’ is different than it is in other democracies: specifically, it is ‘legal, ethical and theological rather than analytical; and where it is analytical, it is personal and partisan rather than impersonal’. In the decade that followed, Richard Hofstadter delivered a lecture at Oxford University that was the genesis for his idiosyncratic classic The Paranoid Style in American Politics. In it, Hofstadter sought to make sense of the rise of the far right in US politics following McCarthyism and foreshadowing Barry Goldwater. Hofstadter (2008: 44) noted that its proponents claimed to be ‘conservatives’ to enhance their respectability but were in practice consumed with a ‘profound if largely unconscious hatred of our society and our ways’.

Both books earned their status as masterworks in the Trump era. The investigation of the Trump campaign’s ties to Russia by former FBI Director Robert Mueller consumed Washington during his administration’s first two years. Debate and speculation about its endgame was legal, ethical and theological in equal measure according to Lasswell’s formula. It was also, of course, intensely personal and partisan, as was nearly everything about Trump’s White House.

Trump’s astonishingly rapid political rise found a launch pad in popular alienation with the status quo of modern American ‘society and its ways’, to employ Hofstadter’s strap-line. Poor and lower middle class – especially white - citizens in America’s heartland, hit hard by the post-2008 Great Recession, intensely resented how the US had been transformed by globalization and dominated by globalist elites, mostly clustered on either coast. Trump presented himself as a conservative, but one who – in foreign policy terms – seized on ‘a widespread rejection of globalization and international involvement and...a questioning of long-standing postures and policies, ranging from openness to trade and immigrants to a willingness to maintain alliances and overseas commitments’ (Haas 2017: 2). In foreign policy terms, Trump’s election was a symptom more than a cause of disillusion with America’s habitual support for liberal internationalism.

That is not to say that Trump lacks aspiration to effect radical changes to US foreign policy and IR. On the campaign trail, Trump's 'foreign-policy message was crude and often strewn with factual errors, but it was unmistakably different' (Wright 2017: 2627). Trump distanced himself from Republican isolationists by promising 'kick-ass' activism that would put America first and make it a winner, instead of a compromiser or loser, when its interests clashed with those of other states. But America would become 'great again' on the cheap by paring back its foreign policy bureaucracy and convincing Mexico to build a wall to keep its nationals from immigrating to the US (see Sestanovich 2017). While Trump's bluff and bluster often left his core foreign policy beliefs less than entirely clear, three nonetheless seemed well-established (see Wright 2017: 3230 cf).

First, Trump believed that American allies owed vast amounts of money for past and present US security guarantees. In one of his first meetings with a foreign leader – Germany's Angela Merkel – Trump shocked diplomats by claiming that Germany owed the US billions for ensuring its security over the course of years. A few months later, Trump attended a Brussels NATO summit at which a memorial to the victims of the 11th September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US was unveiled at the alliance's new headquarters. At the unveiling ceremony, Trump shocked his own advisors by failing to confirm the American commitment to Article 5, which holds that an attack on one NATO state is an attack on all. The only time it had ever been invoked was on 9.11.

Second, Trump was on record as opposing every trade deal to which the US had signed since World War II. Trump's campaign promises to – say – abrogate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) or declare China a currency manipulator on his first day in office failed to materialize. But his administration demanded renegotiation of NAFTA with Canada and Mexico. Trump also abandoned the US-China Comprehensive Economic Dialogue launched by US President Barack Obama and Chinese President Hu Jintao to resolve trade and investment disputes. In early 2018, targeting China, Trump a serious global trade war by slapping punitive tariffs on imports of mount foreign-made steel and aluminium on spurious national security grounds, even though the US imported very little Chinese steel or aluminium (it accounted for around 4 per cent of total steel imports).³

³ See <https://www.economist.com/news/finance-and-economics/21721413-far-saving-jobs-it-will-destroy-them-protecting-american-steel-imports> (accessed 4 March 2018).

Third, Trump personalized the political and did little to hide his affinity with authoritarian strongmen such as Russia's Vladimir Putin, China's Xi Jinping or Egypt's Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. His soft spot for autocrats had foreign policy consequences. The US President's admiration for the 32 year old Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, appeared a factor in Trump's refusal to certify continued US participation in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the multilateral deal to curb Iran's nuclear programme. Trump shifted from threatening a pre-emptive strike in response to North Korea's nuclear weapons programme to meeting Kim Jong-un to discuss denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula and describing him as 'very talented'.

Of course, Trump's empathy with authoritarians could cut towards policy continuity instead of change. His visit to China in late 2017, during which he expressed his esteem for President Xi in glowing terms saw him, bizarrely, claim that the huge US bilateral trade deficit was the fault of his predecessors, not China. But European leaders needed to get used to Trump's lack of any fellow feeling for them as democratically-elected leaders.

The case for viewing Trump's agency in foreign policy as potentially lethal to the liberal international order was certainly strong. Nevertheless, at least two different sources of structural constraint imposed discipline on the Trump administration's foreign policy in its first years in office. The first was the existing network of international organizations. Trump's sabre-rattling rhetoric about the progression of North Korea's nuclear capability was terrifying. But, in practice, the US mostly worked via the UN Security Council, as well as (of course) bilaterally with China to ramp up sanctions in response to successive tests of North Korean ballistic missiles. North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim was thus coaxed to the negotiating table.

Within NATO, Trump's agency reinforced political will in Europe, already coalescing in response to Russian aggression, to increase tangibly its military strength and preparedness. A month after Trump's troublesome visit to Brussels, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg convinced the alliance's Defence Ministers to develop plans by the end of 2017 to meet the agreed target of spending 2 per cent of annual GDP on defence. Non-US NATO defence spending increased 4.3 per cent in 2017, with Romania, Latvia and Lithuania set to join the existing 5 states – the US, UK, Greece, Estonia and Poland – that already met the 2 per cent target. France announced large increases in defence spending foreseen to equal

1.82 per cent of GDP in 2018.⁴ Even Germany ramped up military spending, although gradually and from a low base, since meeting the 2 per cent target would have meant nearly doubling its annual military spending. All told, 25 of 29 NATO member states raised their defence spend during Trump's first year in office.⁵

NATO allies also created two new command centres, one focused on maritime operations and the other on the logistics of moving forces across the European continent quickly in a crisis. The alliance further agreed to beef up its cyber defences, suggesting a third command centre could be in the offing. Anxious to reaffirm its commitment to NATO after Brexit, the UK secured the chairmanship of NATO's powerful military committee, an important step since it was likely to lose its traditional hold on Deputy Supreme Allied Commander Europe as the post held specific duties for NATO-EU cooperation. A former US Ambassador to NATO, Douglas Lute, commended NATO's reawakening: 'Here you have one of the pillars of the international order – which as a group these institutions are doubted and criticized today – you have one pillar that is looking at itself and taking reasoned, considered, responsible steps to adapt'.⁶

Where Trump the change agent appeared least constrained was on trade policy. The 'President's 2017 Trade Policy Agenda' that the Trump administration sent to Congress (as required by statute) blustered that the administration would 'aggressively defend American sovereignty over matters of trade policy' (USTR 2017: 3).⁷ The US repeatedly blocked appointments to the WTO's appellate body that ultimately ruled on trade disputes, leading the EU Commissioner for Trade to accuse the US administration of 'killing the WTO from the inside'.⁸ Meanwhile, the NAFTA renegotiations dragged on, with US Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer accusing Canada and Mexico in late 2017 of being unwilling 'seriously to engage on provisions that will lead to a rebalanced agreement'.⁹

⁴ *Expatica* (France), 8 November 2017; https://www.expatica.com/fr/news/country-news/France-budget-defence_1530717.html (this link and all others cited were accessed 1-3 December 2017 except where noted).

⁵ See *Politico* (Europe edition), 28 June 2017; <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-jens-stoltenberg-spending-increase-non-us-by-4-3-percent-in-2017/>.

⁷ See also https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/03/01/trump-may-ignore-wto-in-major-shift-of-u-s-trade-policy/?utm_term=.4da521598c46.

⁷ See also https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2017/03/01/trump-may-ignore-wto-in-major-shift-of-u-s-trade-policy/?utm_term=.4da521598c46.

⁸ Quoted in *Financial Times*, 10 November 2017; <https://www.ft.com/content/5afbd914-a2b2-11e7-8d56-98a09be71849>.

⁹ Quoted in <https://www.forbes.com/sites/nathanielparishflannery/2017/11/30/have-nafta-talks-reached-a-breaking-point/#77383900276b>.

Yet, even on trade, Trump appeared constrained by the practicalities of wider foreign policy goals. His threat to withdraw from the US-South Korea free trade agreement was shelved in favour of a renegotiation – which agreed minor changes after only 11 days and exempted South Korea from steel tariffs - amidst efforts to handle the North Korea nuclear crisis. On trade as on other foreign policy issues, Trump faced a second set of constraints on which foreign policy analysts often focus: access to and power wielded within US foreign policy by multiple institutions and civil society voices. Trump's threat of punitive steel tariffs was initially resisted by a coalition of US manufacturers who benefitted from access to cheap, foreign steel. It was also staunchly opposed by the EU, which signalled it would hit back with \$3.5 billion worth of retaliatory sanctions on goods from bourbon to blue jeans to motorcycles.¹⁰ Modernizing a time-honored tradition in trade wars, Trump took to Twitter to ramp up the rhetoric: 'If the EU wants to further increase their already massive tariffs and barriers on US companies doing business there, we will simply apply a Tax on their cars which pour freely into the US'.¹¹

Another check on Trump's agency was the power of the US Congress in foreign policy. In early 2018, the US Senate effectively froze America's Russia policy by voting 98-2 to limit Trump's ability to suspend or lift sanctions on Russia. Congress also placed limits on the Trump administration's attempts to impose swingeing budget cuts on the State Department and USAid.

Yet another force for continuity over change was the professional US foreign policy community, an entity John Mearsheimer has labelled 'the Blob'.¹² According to this view, few differences exist between Democrat and Republican foreign policy operatives in terms of foreign policy outlook, and any differences that do arise result from the seeking of short-term political gain. Add to the mix career foreign policy officials and the consensus in terms of foreign policy viewpoint is both extended and reinforced. Members of 'the Blob' tend to be conservative and favour continuity over change. Well into his second year as President,

¹⁰ See <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/02/us/politics/trump-tariffs-steel-aluminum.html?hp&action=click&pgtype=Homepage&clickSource=story-heading&module=first-column-region®ion=top-news&WT.nav=top-news> (accessed 3 March 2018).

¹¹ Quoted in <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/03/us/politics/trump-european-cars-tariff-trade.html> (accessed 4 March 2018).

¹² Here I borrow from Mearsheimer's contribution to a roundtable on 'America First vs. the Legitimacy of the American International System?' held 2nd September 2017 at the annual conference of the American Political Science Association in San Francisco.

Trump had still not made appointments to many key foreign policy positions, leaving in place career officials without political appointees above them to ram through change. For example, there was still no Chief of the US Mission to the EU – effectively, no EU Ambassador – as of June 2018. The phenomenon was by no means exclusive to Europe. With crises roiling the ‘Northern Triangle’ of Central America – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – the US faced a migrant surge with no Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs (the top US diplomat for the region) or Ambassador to Honduras in place.¹³ Well into Trump’s second year in office, US ambassadorships remained vacant in Egypt, South Korea and Turkey.

It was debatable whether Trump’s senior foreign policy appointees could be counted as members of ‘the Blob’. But what came to be known as the ‘axis of adults’ – Secretary of Defence Jim Mattis, National Security Advisor Herbert McMaster, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson – initially seemed to round the hard edges off Trump’s America First agenda. To illustrate, McMaster co-authored a Wall Street Article with the Head of Trump’s National Economic Council, Gary Cohn, that tried to clean up the mess of Trump’s March 2017 NATO visit by claiming (falsely) that Trump had ‘reconfirm[ed]...America’s commitment to NATO and Article 5’ (McMaster and Cohn 2017). The article also argued – gamely, if unconvincingly (see Summers 2017) – that ‘America first doesn’t mean America alone’, while parroting Trump’s conviction that ‘the world is not a global community’ (McMaster and Cohn 2017).

Yet, by spring 2018, Tillerson, McMaster, and Cohn had all left the administration. The new Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, was an ardent hawk on Iran. John Bolton – one of the most aggressive unilateralists ever to hold a senior US foreign policy position – was Trump’s National Security Advisor. Cohn’s departure elevated the status of hard-line trade advisor Peter Navarro, the (co-)author of *Death By China* (Navarro and Autry 2011), who unleashed a shocking attack on Justin Trudeau after a June 2018 Group of Seven summit, bellowing that there was ‘a special place in hell’ for Canada’s Prime Minister.¹⁴

In short, an interrogation of the power of agency vs. structure – and multiple sources of ‘structure’ – yields a mixed picture when applied to Trump’s foreign policy. But a crucial

¹³ J. Webber and J.P. Rathbone, ‘US braced for migrant surge as region convulses’, Financial Times, 2 December 2017. It also mattered that Trump proposed to cut the State Department’s budget by 31 per cent, Tillerson announced cuts of 8 per cent to State’s officer corps and the number of (mostly young) people taking the US Foreign Service officer entry test fell by one-third in 2017. See New York Times, 27 November 2017.

¹⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-us-canada-44435081/trump-trudeau-special-place-in-hell-for-justin-trudeau>.

question at a time when US international leadership seems to be in question is: can Europe help fill the leadership vacuum? Is Europe up to the job?

3. Europe: Time to Shine? Or Decline?

The election of Donald Trump presents Europe with an opportunity to assert both its values and foreign policy nous in a way much of the world would find welcome. The EU's efforts to make something of its Common Foreign and Security Policy and Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) plus deliver on its Trade For All strategy - which promised that EU trade policy would 'dovetail with the EU's development and broader foreign policies so that they mutually reinforce one another' (Commission 2015: 2) – faced an opportune political moment. With Trump in the White House, EU member governments had strong incentives to step up their efforts to preserve multilateralism and ensure the liberal international system's survival.

Unfortunately, the moment arrived at (or just after) a time of acute crisis in Europe. George Soros (2015: 4) reckoned that the EU faced 5 crises by late 2015: on migration, the euro, Greece, Ukraine and Brexit. No system of government is very good at solving multiple crises at once, let alone one as convoluted as the EU. If the first 4 crises were at least contained (not solved) over the next two years, Brexit certainly was not at time of writing. It consumed EU diplomatic and political time and attention to the point where the Union at times seemed to lack the 'bandwidth' for anything else.

One result was that research on the EU focused on 'crisis' became a growth industry (see Dinan *et al* 2017; Peterson 2017: 349). It was supplemented by works, many by journalists, focused on 'the end of Europe' (Kirchick 2017) or – linking Europe's demise with the rise of Trump - 'the end of western liberalism' (Luce 2017; see also Hewitt 2013; Judis 2016; Krastev 2017). The most breathless saw the rise of populism as a cancer that had infected western democracies: 'Europe today is breaking apart; it is increasingly undemocratic, economically stagnant, threatened by extremists of all stripes from the illiberal left to the authoritarian right, and slowly headed down the once unfathomable path to war' (Kirchick 2017: 95). Even Thomas Wright of the usually sober Brookings Institution argued that 'Brexit has put the European Union on the brink of a breakup' (Wright 2017: 640, 644).

Amidst the doom and gloom, the EU – leaving aside but also spurred by Brexit – quietly took steps that put it as close as it had ever been to actual leadership in IR. It helped that the

shocks of the Great Recession, which hit (especially southern) Europe as hard as any other region of the world, finally started to fade. The EU economy grew by 2.4 per cent, the fastest pace in a decade, in 2017. The recovery gathered steam over the course of the 5 previous years, with the EU's economy out-growing that of the US in 2016-17, and European unemployment falling to a 9 year low (Juncker 2017).

Moreover, Brexit actually promised to facilitate solidarity on foreign policy, either because the UK's absence removed obstacles to new initiatives or because London looked to demonstrate its continued international weight. Falling into the first category were steps towards what EU Commission (2017) President Jean-Claude Juncker termed a 'European Defence Union'. All but 2 of the remaining 27 EU member states signed up to military commitments under Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) in late 2017. Crucially, PESCO called for all to increase their share of spending on defence research and technology to the NATO target of 2 per cent of annual spending. Perhaps even more important was earlier agreement on a European Defence Fund worth more than €5 billion per year: a potentially critical step towards consolidating Europe's military research and procurement efforts (see Biscop 2018). For the first time, the EU's CSDP efforts seemed to be driving the NATO alliance towards closer cooperation instead of competing with it.

Prominent in the second category – where the UK was keen to show its relevance – was the Iran nuclear deal. After Trump pulled the US out, European partners to the agreement – France, Germany and the UK – closed ranks, with their Heads of State or Government issuing a joint statement signalling strong support for the deal.¹⁵ In presentational terms, however, it mattered that they left it to the EU's High Representative for foreign policy, Federica Mogherini, to deliver a strongly-worded rebuke of Trump's decision, which stressed: '[i]t is not a bilateral agreement. It does not belong to any single country. And it is not up to any country to terminate it'.¹⁶

More generally, EU foreign policy-makers seemed to connect the political reality of drift in the transatlantic alliance with how poorly-coordinated the Union's foreign policy tools often were. Mogherini (2016) found an opportune moment – even before Trump's election – to unveil an 'EU Global Strategy'. 'Global' referred not only to geographic reach

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/declaration-by-the-heads-of-state-and-government-of-france-germany-and-the-united-kingdom>.

¹⁶ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9rO1gCxy8>.

but also to the range of EU policy instruments, including energy, counterterrorism, diplomatic, military and trade policies. The Strategy raised eyebrows by embracing the idea of the EU's 'strategic autonomy'. While it was framed as the ability to respond in a coordinated way to threats and crises, many viewed it as a call for European independence from the US security umbrella. The Strategy appeared to pave the way for the EU's subsequent steps towards a European Defence Union, although Trump's description of NATO as 'obsolete' reinforced European will to make sure the EU's push on defence cooperation added value in terms of strengthening NATO.

In short, reports of the EU's demise seem premature. That much was clear even without knowing the fate of French President Emmanuel Macron's proposals to bolster Eurozone cooperation with a common budget and Finance Minister or the consequences of the German Social Democratic Party's push for a 'refoundation of Europe' and a common European tax policy as the price for supporting Merkel in a new coalition government following Germany's 2017 election.¹⁷ What was less clear was the fate of the transatlantic alliance, which was showing signs of atrophy even before Trump's election.

4. The Transatlantic Alliance: Structurally Sound or History Bound?

When we assess the current health of US-European relations, another mixed picture emerges. As we have seen, the combination of Russia's adventurism and Trump's goading spurred NATO to ramp up both its operational and military capacity. Yet, over time the EU itself has become the most important locus of transatlantic policy cooperation (see Peterson 2016a). On nearly all non-military issues – including financial regulation, cybersecurity or sanctions on Russia – the EU is a policy factory. Even on counterterrorism, organised crime and homeland security, it is with the EU – not NATO – that the US engages in transatlantic exchange and cooperation (see Rees 2006).

Most US-EU cooperation grew out of the Clinton era New Transatlantic Agenda (NTA) agreed in 1995. It initially sought to impose high-level political direction on policy cooperation, as set out in a lengthy Joint Action Plan (listing some 150 joint actions), with twice-annual summits between the US President and cabinet and the EU Commission, including its President plus the President of the EU Council of Ministers (see Gardner 1997;

¹⁷ T. Buck, 'Schulz issues tough terms for Merkel alliance', [Financial Times](#), 2 December 2017.

Steffenson 2005). However, most summits were set-piece affairs with little actual political exchange. They were reduced to once per year in 2000.

An evaluative study of the NTA released to coincide with its 20th anniversary found that the political profile of the initiative had faded (Peterson *et al* 2005). Still, transatlantic policy cooperation was intensive and often successful, including on difficult issues such as homeland security, competition policy, Afghanistan and Turkey. So the worker bees continued to work away even in times of high political transatlantic turmoil over (say) the Iraq War. In contrast, annual NTA summits deigned to adopt so-called 'deliverables' – often on micro-issues such trade in small arms or educational exchanges – with US Presidents subjected to almost endless speeches and requests for photos from European leaders. In 2010, the holder of the rotating EU Council Presidency – Spain – learned from media reports that Barack Obama did not plan to attend the NTA Summit they were organising in Madrid since he had not found previous summits useful (Wright 2017: 631). At time of writing, no summit under the auspices of the NTA had been held since 2014, with EU leaders meeting the US President instead in the margins of NATO summits.

More generally, the NTA shows how partnership in IR cannot be engineered or institutionalized in the absence of common interests (see Peterson and Steffenson 2009). Realist IR theorists would no doubt point to transatlantic relations illustrates the edict of Lord Palmerson – UK Foreign Secretary for nearly 35 years at the height of British power in the 19th century – that there are no such things as permanent alliances, only permanent interests. However, to do so would be to neglect how Europe remains Washington's first port of call on security questions and most economic ones. Regular bilateral exchanges continue in broad policy areas such as homeland security (which features twice-annual ministerial meetings) as well as on discrete issues such as electronic cars. The lead official on relations with the US in the EU's European External Action Service – which took on the feel of a genuine foreign ministry – termed the NTA 'a matter of history now. But lots of dialogues go merrily along...things are still ticking over at the working level'.¹⁸

If lines of continuity are visible in transatlantic relations at the working level, we can also find them at the political level. Well before Donald Trump's election, successive post-Clinton US administrations publicly expressed disappointment with Europe's ability to deliver

¹⁸ Interview, Brussels, 27 April 2017.

on key US foreign policy priorities. Even Obama, an instinctive multilateralist, repeatedly aired his frustration with both the EU and NATO. After using the prime political real estate of his 2013 State of the Union address to launch negotiations on a Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, the negotiations ground on inconclusively mostly because of European inflexibility (see Peterson 2016b). By the time Trump arrived and suspended the negotiations, European officials admitted that – even if they were re-started – there would be ‘2 years at least of negotiations left to get a deal’.¹⁹

In a revealing interview during his final year in office, Obama pointed to the Libya crisis in 2011 as a moment of particular US disappointment with Europe (Goldberg 2016). Europe’s gung-ho assertiveness to remove Muammar Qaddafi and prevent a threatened bloodbath in Benghazi – Libya’s second-largest city - seemed hypocritical when European militaries ran out of serviceable weapons and had to rely on US firepower to complete the NATO-led operation. Obama was irked by an anonymous US official’s claim that the US was ‘leading from behind’ in Libya: ‘The irony is that it was precisely to prevent the Europeans and Arab states from holding our coats while we did all the fighting that we, by design, insisted [they take the lead]. It was part of the anti-free rider campaign’ (Goldberg 2016). Asked to elaborate, Obama observed that the military operation was executed

as well as I could have expected...And despite all that, Libya is a mess...When I go back and ask myself what went wrong, there’s room for criticism, because I had more faith in the Europeans, given Libya’s proximity, being invested in the follow-up...[Libya is a source of] a massive migration into Europe that destroys Europe, [potentially] ends the European project, and everyone runs for cover and you’ve got the 1930s all over again, with nationalism and fascism breaking out (Goldberg 2016).

Obama’s remarks suggest, ironically, that the future of US-European relations and the liberal international order depend less than we might expect on what the US or Europe do to invest in their alliance or in foreign policy more generally. What really matters is domestic democratic politics in Europe and America. The election of Trump, Brexit and the rise of far right parties across Europe can be viewed as part of a single narrative of rising disillusion with

¹⁹ Interview, European External Action Service, 27 April 2017.

traditional political classes and outcomes in western democracies, as well as globalization more generally. The narrative is sourced partly in contingent factors such as the Great Recession, Europe's migration crisis and media fragmentation.

In important respects, Europe could be viewed as countering the narrative. Macron's victory over the far right candidate Marine Le Pen was decisive and Merkel remained German Chancellor after French and German elections in 2017. The EU reacted to Trump's election and Brexit by redoubling its commitment to multilateralism, as shown by its advocacy of the Iran nuclear deal or a 2-state solution in the Middle East peace process.²⁰

Yet, in the first (of 2) round(s) of the French Presidential election, an astonishing majority of young, 18-34 year old French voters backed either the far left (30 per cent) or far right (21 per cent), while Macron managed only 18 per cent. Merkel's centre-right Christian Democrat Union (CDU) suffered a humiliating loss of nearly 8 per cent of its 2013 vote share in Germany's 2017 poll, while 1 in 8 German voters opted for the anti-EU, far right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party. AfD became the largest opposition party in the German Bundestag. Ominously, it claimed around 362,000 Facebook followers, compared to the CDU's 154,000 (Garton Ash 2017: 4).

In short, the US and Europe seem to have reached multiple crossroads at once. One is located in their internal democratic politics, which are in clear need of renewal and fresh ideas about the rights and obligations of their democratic citizens. Another concerns their alliance. NATO and EU-NATO cooperation both show signs of reinvigoration. But the EU itself remains fragile at a time when a US President occupies the White House who backed Brexit and repeatedly has expressed disdain for the EU. Germany's Foreign Minister, Sigmar Gabriel forcefully argued that US 'withdrawal' as a guarantor of western values under Trump 'forces us to act...Only if the European Union defines its own interests and projects its own power can it survive'.²¹

The liberal international order has arrived at a final intersection. The question is whether it can survive rising western nationalism and the rise of emergent powers outside the western democratic club simultaneously. We would probably be wise not to try to predict

²⁰ Both issues featured prominently in Mogherini's statement at a joint press conference with Tillerson on 5th December 2017. See <https://www.politico.eu/article/rex-tillerson-federica-mogherini-visits-brussels-amid-doubts-about-his-future-and-his-boss/>.

²¹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-05/germany-says-trump-s-u-s-withdrawal-means-europe-must-step-up>.

which way things will turn on any of these fronts. But it also seems clear that all are connected and that major changes in IR that threaten serious conflict and damage to the international order cannot be dismissed out of hand.

Conclusion

Defenders of the post-war international order might take comfort in the claim of many theorists that IR is mostly about 'recurrence and repetition' (Wight 1966), and that structure trumps agency. However, such an account discounts the effects of the global power shift away from the West as well as historical evidence that such shifts usually have led to conflict (Kupchan 2012). From the perspective of foreign policy analysis and constructivist theory, Donald Trump's agency in pursuing his America First agenda faces a range of constraints, both institutional and political. But his administration's conviction that 'the world is not a global community' (McMaster and Cohn 2017), asserted by two of Trump's more moderate and now departed figures, suggests that the liberal international order will somehow need to survive the Trump era because there is no short-term prospect for its renewal.

Or, maybe, as we have seen, Europe may seize on the rise of Trump – as well as Putin's Russia – to raise its game. The evidence so far is disparate. But the Trump era marks both an opportunity as well as a challenge to Europe. It could be that Europe has woken up late to American disillusion with its transatlantic alliance that predates Trump.

By the end of Trump's first year in power, a range of works had appeared that tried to shed light on the forces that made possible his meteoric rise. King (2017) argued that globalisation was a political choice that threatened the demise of democratic ideas and institutions. A leading critic of 'hyper-globalization' insisted that the internationalization of markets drove a wedge between highly-skilled cosmopolitans who could take advantage of them and those 'left behind' (Rodrik 2017). A leading legal scholar and former Obama administration official, Cass Sunstein (2017), offered a chilling assessment of the drift towards information 'echo chambers' in which citizens consumed only information that accorded with their own beliefs.

All of these works might seem a long way removed from debates about agency vs. structure in IR. But they, as well as a lot of empirical evidence from contemporary democratic politics, suggest that the fate of the liberal international order begins at home. Western political classes need to design policy solutions to the externalities of globalization, including

rising inequality, job losses from automation, and surges in migration. But, perhaps above all, they need to develop counter-narratives to America First and other appeals to the worst angels of western citizens' natures.

REFERENCES

- Alcaro, R., Peterson, J. and Greco, E. (eds) (2016) The West and the Global Power Shift: Transatlantic Relations and Global Governance (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave).
- Biscop, S. (2018) 'European Defence: Give PESCO a Chance', Survival, 60 (3): 161-80.
- Carlsnaes, W. (1992) 'The Agency/Structure Problem in Foreign Policy Analysis', International Studies Quarterly, 36 (3): 245-70.
- Commission (2015) Trade for All: Towards a More Responsible Trade and Investment Strategy. Luxembourg: European Union;
http://trade.ec.europa.eu/doclib/docs/2015/october/tradoc_153846.pdf.
- Commission (2017) 'President Jean-Claude Juncker's State of the Union Address 2017'. Brussels, 13 September; http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_SPEECH-17-3165_en.htm.
- Dinan, D., Nugent, N. and Paterson, W. (2017) (eds) The European Union in Crisis. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave.
- Gardner, A. (1997) A New Era in US-EU Relations? The Clinton Administration and the New Transatlantic Agenda. Aldershot and Brookfield VT: Ashgate.
- Garton Ash, T. (2017) 'It's the Kultur, Stupid', New York Review of Books, 7-20 December: 4-10.
- Goldberg, J. (2016) 'The Obama Doctrine', The Atlantic, April;
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.
- Haas, R. (2017) A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order. New York: Penguin.
- Hay, C. (1995) 'Structure and Agency' in D. Marsh and G. Stoker (eds) Theory and Methods in Political Science. Basingstoke and New York: Macmillan.

- Hewitt, G. (2013) The Lost Continent. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Hofstadter, R. (2008) The Paranoid Style in American Politics. New York: Vintage Books.
- Ikenberry, G.J. (2001) After Victory: Institutions, Strategic Restraint and the Rebuilding of Order After Major Wars. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Ikenberry, G.J. (2017) 'The plot against American foreign policy. Can the liberal order survive?', Foreign Affairs, 46 (2) (May/June): 2-9.
- Judis, J.B. (2016) The Populist Explosion: How the Great Recession Transformed American and European Politics. New York: Columbia Global Reports.
- Keohane, R.O. and Nye Jr., J.S. (2011) Power and Interdependence. Cambridge: Pearson, 4th edn.
- King, S.D. (2017) Grave New World: the End of Globalization, the Return of History. New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press.
- Kirchick, J. (2017) The End of Europe. New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press (Kindle edition).
- Krastev, I. (2017) After Europe. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Kupchan, C. (2012) No One's World: the West, the Rising Rest and the Coming Global Turn. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lasswell, H.D. (1950) 'World Politics and Personal Insecurity' in H.D. Lasswell and others, A Study of Power. Glencoe, IL: the Free Press.
- Luce, E. (2017) The Retreat of Western Liberalism. London: Little Brown.
- McMaster, H.R. and Cohn, G.D. (2017) 'America First Doesn't Mean America Alone', The Wall Street Journal, 30 May; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-first-doesnt-mean-america-alone-1496187426>.
- Moghereni, F. (2016) Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy. Brussels: European External Action Service); <https://europa.eu/globalstrategy/en/global-strategy-foreign-and-security-policy-european-union>
- Moravcsik, A. (2003) 'Liberal International Relations Theory: a Scientific Assessment' in C. Elman and M. Fendius Elman (eds) Progress in International Relations Theory: Appraising the Field. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Navarro, P. and Autry, G. (2011) Death By China: Confronting the Dragon – a Global Call to Action. New York: Prentice-Hall.

- Peterson, J. (2016a) 'All Roads Don't Lead to Brussels (But Most Do): European Integration and Transatlantic Relations' in R. Alcaro, J. Peterson and E. Greco (eds) The West and the Global Power Shift. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Peterson, J. (2016b) 'Choosing Europe or Choosing TTIP? The European Union and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership', European Foreign Affairs Review, 21 (3): 383-402.
- Peterson, J. (2017) 'Juncker's Political European Commission and an EU in Crisis', Journal of Common Market Studies, 55 (2): 349-67.
- Peterson, J. et al (2005) Review of the Framework for Relations Between the European Union and the United States: an Independent Study. Brussels: European Commission.
- Peterson, J. and Steffenson, R. (2009) 'Transatlantic Institutions: Can Partnership be "Engineered"?', British Journal of Politics and International Relations, 11 (1): 25-45.
- Rees, W. (2006) Transatlantic Counter-terrorism Cooperation: the New Imperative. London and New York: Routledge.
- Rengger, N. (2007) 'Realism, Tragedy and the Anti-Pelagian Imagination in International Political Thought' in M.C. Williams (ed) Realism Reconsidered: the Legacy of Hans J. Morgenthau in International Relations. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Rodrik, D. (2017) Straight Talk on Trade: Ideas for a Sane World. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Sestanovich, S. (2017) 'The Brilliant Incoherence of Trump's Foreign Policy', The Atlantic, May; <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/05/the-brilliant-incoherence-of-trumps-foreign-policy/521430/>.
- Smith, S., Hadfield, A. and Dunne, T. (2012) Foreign Policy: Theories, Actors, Cases. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn.
- Steffenson, R. (2005) Managing EU-US Relations: Actors, Institutions and the New Transatlantic Agenda. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

- Summers, L. (2017) 'Business Needs to Show That There is More to America than Trump', Financial Times, 4 June; <https://www.ft.com/content/b4cb6d92-46b9-11e7-8d27-59b4dd6296b8>.
- Sunstein, C. (2017) #Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- USTR (2017) The President's 2017 Trade Policy Agenda. Washington DC: US Trade Representative; <https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/reports/2017/AnnualReport/Chapter%20I%20-%20The%20President%27s%20Trade%20Policy%20Agenda.pdf>.
- Waltz, K.N. (1979) Theory of International Politics. New York: Random House.
- Wendt, A. (1992) 'Anarchy is What States Make of It: the Social Construction of Power Politics', International Organization, 46 (2): 391-426.
- Wight, M. (1966) 'Why is There No International Theory?' in H. Butterfield and M. Wight (eds) Diplomatic Investigations. London: George Allen and Unwin.
- Wright, T.J. (2017) All Measures Short of War: the Contest for the 21st Century and the Future of American Power. New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press (Kindle edition).